

SCANDINAVIAN VÍNA AND ENGLISH BATTLES

A minor backwater in the flow of debate about where the battle of Brunanburh, fought by King Æthelstan against Anlaf Guthfrithsson and Constantine king of the Scots in 937, is the river Vína. The battle of *Brunanburh* is generally accepted to be that named Vínheiðr in Egils Saga, where the eponymous hero's brother Þórólfr died. Vínheiðr in the saga is located by a river and nearby is the wood Vínuskógr, and a widespread assumption is that the river might have been named Vína, and so have supplied the first element of the places named in the saga.¹ When Egill laments his brother's death in verse, he says that the earth will grow over the grave Vínu nær 'near Vína', which is likely to be a reference to a river.²

In discussion of these names, Campbell rejected any connection with Symeon of Durham's alternative name for the 937 battle, Weondun, on the basis that Þórólfr fought and died earlier in a battle near the Russian river Dvina (Vína) and the saga author confused the two.³ But Matthew Townend showed that Campbell's argument was based on flawed logic because Haukr Valdísarson's Íslendingadrápa, well before Egils Saga, recorded Þórólfr's death in England fighting for King Æthelstan. He then pointed out that while the phonological correspondence and development is not flawless, *Weon-* could be rendered by Norse Vína.⁴

In between Campbell and Townend, scholars found the possible correspondence of the names and battles compelling; indeed some writers still reconstruct Brunanburh in terms of the largely fictional account in Egils Saga.⁵ The occurrence of the river name Vína in the

1 See, e.g., Keith A. Kelly, 'Egil's Saga', in Michael Livingston, ed., The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook (Exeter, 2011), 209; Alfred P. Smyth, Scandinavian York and Dublin (two vols in one, Dublin, 1987), II, 74.

2 Sigurður Nordal, ed., Egils Saga Skallagrímssonar (Reykjavík, 1933), 142. All following references are to this edition.

3 Alistair Campbell, ed., The Battle of Brunanburh (London, 1938), 68–80.

4 Matthew Townend, English Place-Names in Skaldic Verse (Nottingham, 1998), 88–93.

5 For discussion of some examples, see Keith A. Kelly, 'Truth and a Good Story: Egil's Saga and Brunanburh',

Hrokkinskinna manuscript of Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla, which has given rise to extraordinary speculation about the location of the battle of Bruananburh, is the focus of the discussion below.

Alan Binns, in a passing comment on Heimskringla's account of Haraldr Sigurðsson's campaign before the battle of Stamford Bridge, noted the appearance of the river name Vína in the Hrokkinskinna manuscript.⁶ King Haraldr had arrived in the Ouse sailing south from Orkney along the coast via Scarborough and Holderness, then up the Humber towards York. Chapter 84 in the standard edition of Heimskringla's Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar opens with Síðan fór Haraldr konungr til Humbru ok upp eptir ánni ok lagði þar við land 'Then King Haraldr went to the Humber and up along the river and landed'; Haraldr waited in the Ouse (Þá lá Haraldr konungr í Úsu) to fight the English army of Jarls Morcar and Valtheof from York.⁷ The Hulda manuscript has more detail of Haraldr's arrival at the Ouse: he sailed til humru ok upp ept[ir] ánni t[il] úsu 'to the Humber and up along the river to the Ouse' at fol. 73v.⁸ The Hrokkinskinna scribe additionally has the name Vína, t[il] humru ok up[p] ept[ir] án[n]e vino t[il] úsu at fol. 52v.⁹ Binns commented, "along the river Vinu to the Ouse"—H[rokkinskinna]. This may suggest that the author of H[rokkinskinna] thought of Brunanburh (O.N. Vínheithi in Egils Saga) as being near York' (34).

This would not be an unreasonable suggestion if the scribe of Hrokkinskinna were Snorri, since many scholars believe Snorri was author of both Egils Saga and Heimskringla and so might

in Livingston, ed., The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook, 305–14; Ian McDougall, 'Discretion and Deceit: A Re-examination of a Military Stratagem in Egils Saga', in Tom Scott and Pat Starkey, ed., The Middle Ages in the North-West (Oxford, 1995), 109–42.

6 Alan Binns, East Yorkshire in the Sagas (York, 1966), 34.

7 Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1951), 3 vols, III, 179.

8 A facsimile image of the Hulda manuscript, AM 66 Folio, fol. 73v, is available on the website 'Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages',

<<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/skaldic/db.php?id=5009&if=default&table=images>>, accessed 16 November 2015.

9 A facsimile image of the Hrokkinskinna manuscript, AM 66 Folio, fol. 52v, is available on the website

have made links between the events by using the name Vína.¹⁰ But patently Hrokkinskinna and its scribe are very much later than Snorri and there is no obvious reason to suppose that the scribe had even heard of Vínheiðr, much less made any connection between that and the events of 1066. Since neither Brunanburh nor Vínheiðr/Vínhieði is mentioned in Heimskringla, it is extreme speculation to suppose that the use of the name Vína by this scribe might indicate knowledge of a complex of much earlier events and the places associated with them in an entirely different text. So far as is known, no other source locates the Vína in this particular area, and this addition of the name Vína is not found in any other manuscript than Hrokkinskinna. It looks to be an idiosyncratic addition on the part of the later scribe.

Nevertheless, it is clear enough from the passage that the Vína was imagined by this scribe to be north of the Humber. This passage is an account of the preliminaries to the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. Haraldr sailed up the Humber into the Ouse. Having won the battle at Fulford just outside of York and then gained the submission of the city, five days later Harald confronted the army of the English King Harold Godwinson at Stamford Bridge, approximately five miles north-west of York. The English sources agree with the Scandinavian one to locate the events quite precisely. John of Worcester and Symeon of Durham place Haraldr's disembarkation at Ricall, approximately half way between Goole and York on the Ouse, perhaps two miles north of Selby: Tostius ... sua cum classe uenit, et citato cursu ostium Humbre fluminis intrauerunt, et sic aduersus cursum Vse fluminis nauigantes, in loco qui Richale dicitur applicauerunt 'Tostig joined [Haraldr] with his fleet, ... and on a swift course they entered the mouth of the River Humber; sailing thus up the River Ouse, they landed at a place called Ricall'.¹¹ The Anglo-Saxon

¹⁰ 'Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages',

<<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/skaldic/db.php?id=23109&if=default&table=images>>, accessed 16 November 2015.

¹⁰ See e.g. Diana Whaley, Heimskringla: An Introduction (London, 1991), 16.

¹¹ R. R. Darlington, and P. McGurk, ed., The Chronicle of John of Worcester, trans. Jennifer Bray and P. McGurk (Oxford, 1995), II, 602–3; the near-identical passage in Symeon of Durham's Historia Regum, is ed.

Chronicle C-text has the king and Tostig travelling andlang Usa[n]lup to Eoferwicward ‘along the Ouse up towards York’,¹² and the E-text has them sailing into Humbran oð þet hi coman to Eoferwic ‘into the Humber until they arrived at York’.¹³ The fundamental similarity of these accounts with the Heimskringla one is notable.

Naturally interpreted, the phrase til humru upp eptir áne vino til úsu would suggest that the Hrokkinskinna scribe imagined the Vína was a stretch of river somewhere between the mouth of the Humber and the Ouse at York. The precise point at which the Ouse became the Humber might have been hard to define, but it was evidently part of the main sailing route to York. If the scribe had detailed knowledge of this part of the English river-system, he might have given the name *Vína* to the reach of water between the confluence of the present-day Ouse and Aire at Airmyn, and the confluence of the present-day Ouse and Derwent at Long Drax.¹⁴ This is where the river widens and is still tidal, and so might have been considered estuarine and part of the Humber. The present-day Ouse (and there is little reason to suppose that the medieval Ouse was significantly different) meanders south from York to Selby, then south-east from Selby to Goole, and from there east to the mouth of the Humber estuary, so Haraldr would be sailing upstream, generally northwards from the Humber into the Ouse and on to York.

Using the Scandinavian evidence in support of an argument for the location of the battle of Brunanburh south of the Humber, Michael Wood has the following:

Let us note in passing that one scribe thought the Vína a tributary of the Humber. In Hrokkinskinna, a fifteenth-century manuscript compilation, partly based on Heimskringla, in the section corresponding to chapter 84 of Heimskringla’s Haralds saga

Thomas Arnold, *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia* (London, 1885), II, 180.

12 Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle ... MS. C* (Cambridge, 2001), 121.

13 Susan Irvine, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle ... MS. E* (Cambridge, 2004), 87.

14 The Ordnance Survey 1:50000 Landranger map, Second Series sheet 105, locates Airmyn at grid ref. SE 726253, with the confluence of the Aire and Ouse just to the north; and Long Drax at SE 682287, with the

Sigurðssonar, an addition to the Heimskringla text describes sailing from the Humber to the Ouse by way of the Víná, upp eptir ánni Víná til Úsu ... So Vínheiðr may have been thought of as in the region of the Don valley. In this connection see Smith (1962), VII 127, on the old course of the Don, and for “Humber” usages for the Don as late as the fourteenth century, Hunter Blair (1948) 116.¹⁵

It is hard to see any logic in the argument here. The Don valley is well south of the Humber, and the river flowed north from Doncaster in south Yorkshire to join the Aire ‘east of Snaith’, as Smith records.¹⁶ The present-day river Don was diverted eastwards to join the Ouse at Goole, but the Old River Don (a name first recorded in 1539) is still marked on Ordnance Survey maps north of East Cowick.¹⁷ It joined the Aire some three or four miles upstream of the confluence of that river and the Ouse, south-west of Goole. Since the ancient River Don flowed into the Aire, and the Aire joins the Ouse north-west of Goole, it would be impossible to sail from the Humber up to the Ouse and to York going anywhere near the Don. The Don would only be accessible from the Aire, and the Aire flows mainly east from Leeds. In short, one can sail north up the Ouse to York from the Humber; but one would have to sail from the Aire south to the Don, the opposite direction from York. If the Víná was on the way from the Humber to the Ouse and to York, it cannot have been part of the Aire or near the Don. The association of the Víná and the Don is geographically impossible.

Furthermore, Hunter Blair has no mention of “‘Humber’ usages for the Don’. Hunter Blair remarks that there is a record of a now-lost name Humbreheued in Strafforth wapentake, the

confluence of the Derwent and the Ouse a little to the west.

15 Michael Wood, ‘Brunanburh Revisited’, Saga-Book of the Viking Society, XX (1980), 200–217, f.n. 68 at 216.

16 A. H. Smith, Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire (Cambridge, 1961), VII, 127. The Dutch River diversion of the Don was planned in 1632 to drain the marsh, ibid.

17 At grid ref. SE 668225.

area around Sheffield and Rotherham in the Don valley.¹⁸ He refers to a note by Ekwall in his English River-Names, where Ekwall observes that the regional name Humbreheued ‘is identical on the whole with the Don valley’.¹⁹ This merely indicates that the Don was one of the sources of the Humber, Humbreheued being derived from the river name with the addition of heafod ‘the source of a river’.²⁰ As the Don flowed into the Aire, and the Aire into the Ouse, and the Ouse into the Humber, the Don clearly was one of the headwaters of the Humber. But in no way does this justify the notion that there were “‘Humber” usages for the Don’ with the implication that the Don might have been known as ‘Humber’ at any time, or that one might sail from the Humber estuary via the Don to York, or the suggested corollary that ‘Vínheiðr may have been thought of as in the region of the Don valley’.

Heimskringla does not mention *Brunanburh* and this interpretation of Hrokkinskinna’s reference to Vína makes speculative connections between texts, times and events for which there is no supporting evidence beyond the coincidence of the name. This addition in Hrokkinskinna may be no more than a fifteenth-century scribe’s guess at a location he thought to be important in 1066. If that speculative association were allowed, however, Binns’s geographical location of Vínheiði/Vínheiðr ‘near York’ would make sense of the phrase in Hrokkinskinna. But the idea that ‘Vínheiðr may have been thought of as in the region of the Don valley’ south of the Humber makes no sense geographically, as it bears no relation to the known geography of the Don, the Humber, the Ouse and York.

Wood’s 2013 reiteration of the notions just discussed in ‘Searching for Brunanburh: the Yorkshire context of the “Great War” of 937’ makes some changes, removing the “‘Humber”

18 Peter Hunter Blair, ‘The Northumbrians and their Southern Frontier’, Archaeologia Aeliana 4th ser., XXVI (1948), 98–126, at 116. It seems likely from Hunter Blair’s discussion, however, that he misconstrued heafod, for the interpretation of which see below.

19 Eilert Ekwall, English River-Names (Oxford, 1928), 201.

20 A. H. Smith, English Place-Name Elements (Cambridge, 1956), I, 236, (1) (iv).

usages for the Don', for example, and the idea that Brunanburh might have anything to do with the Don valley.²¹ But we are now told that the saga 'says that a battle which was evidently Brunanburh was fought by a river Vín which the saga implies is south of the "chief town" York' (158 f.n. 96). The saga does not, on inspection, suggest that the action of the battle took place anywhere near York.

The events leading up to the battle of Vínheiðr, and the progress of the conflict itself, are described in chapters 51–55 of Egils Saga. In chapter 51 a brief history of Northumbria is related: [Norðimbraland] höfðu haft at fornu Danakonungar; Jórdík er þar höfuðstaðr 'Northumbria had belonged to Danish kings in former times; York is the capital' (129). In chapter 52, Óláfr Skotakonungr moves against Northumbria and conquers it; then later in the same chapter, Æthelstan hears that Óláfr has conquered a large part of England (mikinn hluta af Englandi, 130), and decides to collect troops in the south before marching north against Óláfr and proposing the site of Vínheiðr for the decisive battle. The mention of York as the 'chief town' of Northumbria is completely detached from the description of the battle, for which no localisation beyond the names Vínheiðr and Vínuskógr is given.

The saga mentions one particular fortified town in the context of the battle, and repeatedly refers to it: í borg þeiri, er fyrr var frá sagt '[Æthelstan spent the night] in that town that was mentioned earlier' (139). It was some distance south from the heath, Vínheiðr: ...í borg þá, er var sunnan undir heiðinni 'in the town that was south of the heath' (133), í borg þeirri, er var næst heiðinni fyrir sunnan 'in the town that was near the heath to the south' (134). The English leader Álfgeirr reið undan suðr á heiðina ... þar til er hann kom nær borg þeiri, er konungr sat 'rode

21 Yorkshire Archaeological Journal, LXXXV (2013), 138–59. Wood does not entirely give up the idea, however, suggesting that 'you went up [the Vín] (or past it) to sail into the Ouse, upp eptir anni Vín til Usu' (158, f.n. 96); the sense 'past' for (upp) eptir has so far escaped the attention of lexicography, e.g. the Copenhagen Dictionary of Old Norse Prose; see < http://dataonp.ad.sc.ku.dk/wordlist_e_adv.html>, s.n. eftir, particularly dat. A, 5, accessed 16 November 2015.

south over the heath till he came near that town which the king occupied' (137); and King Æthelstan went from the town ok sótti norði á heiðina 'and set out north to the heath' (139). Whichever the town was that Æthelstan occupied, the saga is clear that the heath was to the north of it. King Óláfr set up his camp in another fortified town to the north of the heath, which is not named or given particular attention: Borg ein stóð fyrir norðan heiðina; settisk Óláfr konungr þar í borgina ok hafði þar mestan hlut liðs sins 'There was a town north of the heath; King Óláfr occupied it and had the greater part of his army there' (132); and the Scandinavian forces of Hringr and Aðils fóru ... suðr á heiðini 'went south to the heath' (136), but no place-name is mentioned in relation to their camp.

An important episode in Egils Saga, Egill's throwing himself on the mercy of King Eiríkr Blóðøx and composing his poem Höfuðlausn, occupying chapters 59–61 of the saga, takes place in York. Egill is shipwrecked in the Humber, and makes his way to York rather than attempting to hide and escape. Chapter 51 shows awareness of the importance of York in relation to Northumbria; chapter 59 shows a more detailed awareness of the geography of the city. The saga-writer's failure to locate Vínheiðr geographically in relation to York, and the complete absence of any name for the city which is repeatedly referred to in the account of the battle, is thus rather strong evidence that the author did not think the battle took place near York, or even that it took place in Northumbria: he had good reason to mention one or both, but did not, leaving the site of the battle uneasily unlocated.

A review of the Scandinavian sources relating to the (English) Vína and Vínheiðr provides the following evidence: one fifteenth-century scribe of Heimskringla thought a stretch of water between the Humber and York might have been called Vína in 1066; geographically this cannot have had anything to do with the Don valley, and has nothing demonstrably to do with Vínheiðr in Egils Saga. The latter text shows a good knowledge of the geography of Northumbria

and York, but does not locate Vínheiðr in relation to either. The ‘fresh insight’ claimed by Wood about ‘the Yorkshire context’ of Brunanburh, in relation to the Scandinavian sources discussed here, is based on speculation and inaccurate reading of the texts. This particular search leads only to a backwater.

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